

Hers Alone by AirDoodles

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Summary:

There was a time, years ago, when she liked being called Lonnie's girl.

A one shot examining Joyce's relationship with Lonnie, Hawkins, herself, and a mother's perspective on her sons.

Hers Alone

Author's Note:

That moment when you set out to write a Jonathan/Nancy fic and end up with an angsty, introspective Joyce-centric character study piece. Timeline might be a little wonky, but I'm going off the assumption that Jonathan was 16 and Will is 12 in Season 1. Also meant to write more of Hopper in this, but I couldn't get away from Joyce.

WARNING: some offensive language

WARNING: there is very little romance in here, which is why it's not tagged, so if you're expecting a lot more Jim/Joyce or Jonathan/Nancy, move along, I don't have that for you here.

For something with a slightly more Jancy vibe, slightly more Jonathan-centric, check out my other story, "Point and Shoot"

Will and Jonathan are *her* sons. Hers alone.

Joyce repeats the thought in her head, over and over again as she drags a hot iron across the front panel of a faded red flannel shirt. Steam rises up from the fabric, but Joyce isn't sure if her forehead was feeling hot before or after she began laundry.

She knows they mean well, the men in Lonnie's old hunting party and their wives. Or so she convinces herself. They do what they do because, ultimately, she is still one of them — Hawkins resident — and even if they don't actually care, they're polite enough to feign it. A consequence of working in a small grocery shop in a small town is having to run into the same set of ten or twenty people every day, and they know all about your business. Especially if your ex-husband used to be the most admired man in Hawkins.

"So how's Lonnie's little boy doing?" asked Carl, curious about Will a few weeks after news of his recovery had passed through the county.

He was leaning against the check-out counter at Joyce's store. He had smelled like tobacco and the cold, the way Lonnie used to always smell coming home from a hunt. Joyce had tried her hardest not to sneer, at Carl's stench or at his question. She forced herself to smile politely and tell him that *her son*, Will, was nearly his old self again.

Joyce puts the iron aside for a second, turns the shirt over, and begins smoothing out the wrinkles again. Her thoughts are still swimming, mouth pressed into a thin, straight line as she seethes.

Lonnie's little boy. Lonnie's kids. Lonnie's sons. Lonnie's ex-wife. Lonnie's girl.

Lonnie. Lonnie. Lonnie.

Always Lonnie.

In a way, she sort of understands. Lonnie Byers wasn't just another Hawkins resident, back in their day, he was a bit of a celebrity. Lonnie Byers had been a boy scout when he was younger. The older Hawkins residents recognized him from all those times he came a-knocking on their doors, selling raffle tickets or offering to mow their lawns for a quarter, everything dealt with the kind of childish charm that adults loved and remembered into his adolescence and adulthood.

As a teenager, he was charismatic. He joined his father's hunting parties and swapped stories with the men with an old timer's ease. He was a fair shot with a rifle but handguns were his specialty; the men fought each other over who would teach him shoot. Lonnie played baseball, and he was the team captain. He was good, the town talked, saying he'd be the one to make it to the big leagues, put Hawkins on the map and raise it out of obscurity. By the time he was just a sophomore in high school, every single teenaged girl in Hawkins was head-over-heels in love with him. Including herself.

There was a time, years ago, when she liked being called *Lonnie's girl*.

She turns the shirt 90 degrees and begins to iron a sleeve.

It began in the first couple of weeks of her sophomore year. She remembers it vividly, even though it feels like it happened years ago to some other girl. She was sixteen that fall, and she had been looking forward to a great many things during that school year. The Homecoming dance, for one; as a sophomore, it was the first year she'd be allowed to go. Then there was a Creative Writing course that she'd been excited to take.

What she didn't expect, however, was that Hawkins' very own pride, Lonnie Byers, would be assigned the locker right next to hers. She didn't expect to be placed in such close proximity to him and his illustriousness every damned day for an entire school year. She didn't expect that they'd be exchanging shy glances at one another during passing period, before and after school—her wide, doe eyes modestly trying to find something else to look at aside from the beautiful, haunting darkness that gleamed from his eyes. Or that he would graduate from the quiet glances to saying “Hey, Joyce” in a way that made her name sound like a damned prayer, every time they met at the lockers. Or that his eyes would linger on her just a little too long during each interaction or that he would care enough to ask her how her day was going.

Or that, one day, he would invite her to watch him during baseball practice so they could get an ice cream or a burger afterward.

It wasn't long before she was Lonnie's girl, and how she relished that title. Before Lonnie took her hand and put her up on a pedestal and made her glow, she was just Joyce. A normal, middle class, suburban girl with few friends and strict parents and no idea about the future. Now, she was sitting in the passenger seat of his shiny car, talking about life en route to the theater for a movie date with her boyfriend, Lonnie Byers.

“Everyone tries to tell me what's the right way to live,” Joyce complained to Lonnie that night in his car. “I have to go to school, get married, have a kid, live in a cozy two-story house with a dog, and then everything will be fine.”

“By ‘everyone’ you mean your mom and dad, right?” Lonnie asked. Joyce laughed.

“Mostly just my mom,” she said. “But the fact that it came out of her mouth is the whole reason I don’t buy it. That’s what my mom did, you know. The American Dream, and she still doesn’t look any happier than ever. She wants more, I can see it in her. She has regrets.”

“Regrets about what?”

“I don’t know,” Joyce said, laughing again, as if her mother’s self-inflicted misery were some great joke. “Maybe she married the wrong guy. She’s always been vaguely hinting at it. I don’t know. All I know is that I don’t want to make the same mistakes.”

“Amen to that,” Lonnie said, drumming his fingers against the steering wheel of his car. He turned for a brief second and flashed a winning smile at Joyce.

“Don’t worry,” Lonnie said. “We won’t make the same mistakes.”

Joyce tried to suppress it, but she couldn’t help but let her mouth curve into a guilty smile.

“We?” she asked. Lonnie pulled into a parking spot in front of The Hawk. He didn’t answer. He just leaned over, closed the space between them, and kissed her full on the mouth for the first time, and Joyce’s knuckles curled around her seatbelt, feeling like she’d float away if it weren’t keep her here. All the while, she hears the chorus in her head repeating itself:

Lonnie’s girl. Lonnie’s girl. Lonnie’s girl.

That’s me.

A bungalow at the edge of Hawkins was the best they could do with what they had at that time.

Joyce was just 21-years-old with barely enough college credits to be considered a rising sophomore. The best she could do in the way of a job was working a few hours at a food mart in downtown Hawkins. Lonnie was passed over for athletics scholarships, and without the funds to go to college, he had decided to put his plans on hold, work at a car garage, save up some money, and then join Joyce at college in a year or two.

Everything changed when she got pregnant. The wedding was rushed (their parents simply *insisted*). The town barely had time to process their engagement before Lonnie met Joyce at the courthouse and they exchanged vows and rings. All the better, for *no one* could know that Joyce was pregnant (their parents insisted on that, as well).

When Jonathan came along, nine months later, Hawkins was delirious with joy. Lonnie's friends all came over to the Byers house with presents for the little one and cases of wine and hard liquor for the new father, joking that he had finally joined the ranks of real men now that he was married, owned a house, and had a son, and that he was in for a world of adventure now that he was a father. Joyce always felt a little out of place during these house-warming visits, but she ignored her own unease; they were Lonnie's friends, and she knew they meant well.

In the mornings, she was up before anyone else, already anticipating her baby boy's every need. She would pick him up from where he lay, shushed him comfortingly as she made her way to the kitchen. Lonnie would be sleeping on the couch, bottles on the coffee table. She took this as a sign that he was content.

And they were happy. For a while.

Two years go by. The bills came, and they didn't stop for years and years.

Another year passes, and Jonathan is three. The debts began to pile. Jonathan was growing up and while he'd been a very calm baby, the two's and three's were a universally terrible time for all parents. To make ends meet, Joyce had taken on longer hours at the food mart. She needed cash to pay for utilities, to pay off Lonnie's debts, to pay the mortgage, to pay for Lonnie's new car, to pay the girl who watched Jonathan while she was at work, to pay the hospital bill for the stitches she needed after a little accident at home, to be able to post bond the next time Lonnie got dragged in for a DUI, to pay for...

Money, money, money, money — how long could she keep doing this by herself?

Her husband, he was never around. It was always either a hunting trip or overtime at the garage, which is bullshit because she had called Lonnie's co-workers at the garage before only to learn that he sometimes drove two towns over to grab drinks with buddies and god-knows-who-or-what else.

Joyce tried her hardest to remember that her husband is Lonnie Byers, the man of her dreams, the light of her life, her first and last love. She told herself again and again that whatever vices of his she had to put up with, she could do it if it meant they'd be together. That was what you did for your loved ones, right?

But one night, she was looking down at Jonathan, her little boy, playing with a few colored blocks on the carpet in the living room. Lonnie was gone again, probably drunk a few towns over, and Joyce was spooning his dinner into a plastic container to be eaten later. The light above her glowed dim and yellow, an eyesore that was result of the weak electricity that just barely kept her house lit.

He should be here, she thought to herself. *He should be here, with his son, Jonathan is his son!*

The sound of crunching gravel alerted her to Lonnie's return. *This is it*, she told herself as the car's headlights turned off and she heard his footsteps approaching the door. When the lock turned and Lonnie

stepped into the house, Joyce immediately crossed the floor. She shut the door behind him before turning and glaring.

“Where have you been?” she demanded. “Do you know what time it is? You *missed* dinner! I told you to be home at six o’clock!”

“Ooh, dinner at six,” Lonnie said, and then immediately laughed. “Sorry about that, Joyce, didn’t realize you were running some kind of religious order now. Don’t worry I—,”

“Have you been drinking?” Joyce demanded, crossing her arms. Lonnie was starting to walk away from her. While she wouldn’t have done so before, she grabbed his shoulder and spun him around to face her.

“Lonnie!” she shouted into his face. “*What is wrong with you?*”

Lonnie didn’t take well to being shouted at, and he raised his voice in return. “*What the fuck is wrong with you!*” he shouted. “I’ve been home for—what?—two seconds and you’re already up my ass about a load of bullshit. I went out, got a drink with some friends—what, did you expect me to stay here 24/7 like your fucking slave?”

“Of course not!” Joyce shouted back. “But it would be *nice* if you came home for dinner once in a while—!”

“—If you’re so upset about the damned dinner, just don’t cook—!”

“—And we have Jonathan now, in case you didn’t notice—!”

“—I am not fighting you if you’re going to be this fucking delusional and overdramatic—,”

“—Instead of spending time with *your son*—!”

The shouting went on and on, white hot rage coursed through Joyce’s blood as she fought. The house shook with every insult and every accusation, every emotionally-charged outburst. Joyce was awash in angry tears and Lonnie was fuming like a caged tiger. Jonathan had started to cry, but Joyce didn’t notice until there was a knock on their door.

Husband and wife went silent, eyes flitting between the door and each other. Through the window, they saw the red and blue lights of a squad vehicle, a dispatch from the police station. Joyce instinctively leaped to grab Jonathan before heading toward the door. Lonnie beat her to it. He put one hand against the wood and grabbed Joyce's arm with the other. She gasped at his touch, how rough his grip was on her body. His eyes had a sinister look to them.

"You keep quiet and let me do all the talking," Lonnie said. He let her go, shoving her back and further from the door. He ran his fingers through his hair once before clearing his throat and opening the door.

The pair of officers that stood there were an unlikely pair. One was short and thin and old and looked like an elementary school teacher or a skinny, hairless Santa. The other was tall, barrel-chested, and young by comparison, but his eyes looked stern and just slightly tired. Both wore the blue shirts of their uniform, but from the chevron patches, Joyce saw that it was the sergeant and a deputy.

"Hank! Fancy seeing you here, havin' a good night?" Lonnie asked, that superstar smile flying onto his face, and suddenly, he was Lonnie Byers, Hawkins Hero again. Sergeant Peters smiled. In a place like Hawkins, the police knew nearly everyone. The sergeant nodded politely at Lonnie while the deputy turned his stern look on Joyce and the baby in her arms.

"We don't mean to bother you, Lonnie," Sergeant Peters said. "We're just doin' our jobs, but we did get a call from Madge Shaw next door, said she heard some yelling. Got worried so we said we'd pop in and make sure everything was fine.

"So what's this about some yelling we heard?" the deputy asked, cutting in. He turned his stern look away from Joyce for a minute and onto Lonnie, who suddenly found it difficult to keep up with a warm smile under the deputy's scrutiny.

"Everything's fine here, boys," Lonnie said. He turned and looked at Joyce, who was hurriedly trying to calm Jonathan.

"Anything we can help with?" the sergeant asked. Lonnie laughed.

“Unless you’ve got a solution to women’s monthly emotional breakdowns, I don’t think so,” Lonnie said. “You know how they can be. Little bit of blood every month and they just lose their minds. I’m sorry you boys had to be bothered by women’s troubles. Isn’t that right, Joyce?”

Joyce didn’t answer and Lonnie gave her no opportunity. He just looked back at the sergeant good-naturedly as the officer sighed and said something about taking a statement, just as a formality. The conversation didn’t last long, and the sergeant was inching backward when the deputy put a hand on his partner’s shoulder.

“Shouldn’t we take a statement from her perspective, too?” the deputy looked back, past Lonnie, at Joyce. Her expression became both panicked and hopeful at the same time. Lonnie looked at Joyce and then at the deputy. His eyes grew dark.

“What the hell you trying start here, man?” Lonnie asked. “What? My word not good enough for you? My statement not enough?”

Joyce would have cowered under Lonnie’s stare, but the deputy just stood, unfazed. The tall officer shrugged.

“Just a formality,” he said. Lonnie wasn’t amused. But before the situation could escalate further, the sergeant stepped between the men and put a hand on both their shoulders.

“Now, now, boys,” the sergeant said, and then turned to his deputy. “It’s alright, Jim, Lonnie here is a friend.”

“Friends have lied before,” the deputy, Jim, said. Lonnie was livid.

“You callin’ me a liar?” he was bristling for a fight, but the deputy still kept his own emotions in check.

“Just stating a fact,” the deputy looked at Joyce one more time before shrugging the sergeant’s hand off. He turned and walked back toward the square car while Sergeant Peters apologized to Lonnie again for the interruption and then wished him a goodnight. Only then did the sergeant acknowledge Joyce, wishing her and her little one a good night as well, leaving her alone with Lonnie.

On Jonathan's tenth birthday, he came home in tears.

"Sweetie, what's wrong?" Joyce said, crouching down before Jonathan with a four-year-old Will bouncing on her hip. She brushed away the boy's tears with her thumb and begged him to tell her what happened. But Jonathan's eyes were blank as they were wet and red, and whatever happened to him must have been terrible.

"Jonathan, honey—," Joyce said, putting Will down for a minute to reach out to her older son. But the tender moment was interrupted when Lonnie walked in through the screen door, all but shoving his wife and son aside as he passed through to the kitchen for a beer. There was a birthday cake on the table, with candles waiting to be lit and blown out.

"Lonnie, what happened out there?" Joyce asked. Her husband spat into the sink in reply. He brought the beer can up to his mouth and took a swig before walking toward the back door.

"You're turning our son into a little pussy, that's what," he said, disappearing into the yard.

Joyce turned back to Jonathan, who was erupting into a new round of sobs. Joyce took him into her arms, rubbing his back and trying to keep her own tears at bay. She wanted to run out to the shed after Lonnie and... and what?

After that night, she tried to go back to her old contented self, the self that was happy to be Lonnie's girl, Lonnie's wife who had Lonnie's kids. She tried to be the cheerful, suburban mom who was happy to do anything for her family, even put up with her husband's vices.

But she was starting to develop vices of her own. She was starting to no longer care when Lonnie hurt her. She had started smoking, only when she was alone of course, and never when her sons were with her. She had started drinking, late at night, alone on the back porch,

while she fought the urge to pack her bags and just run away. She stared into mirrors for hours on end, thinking to herself "God, I am such a bad mom."

She brought Jonathan into the kitchen to see his birthday cake, but the tears still wouldn't stop. She presented him with his birthday present, a Polaroid like the one he took from Lonnie's office. He had been grounded and yelled at for the trespass, but when he confessed that he'd only wanted to take nice pictures, Joyce thought to get him one of his own. But the tears didn't stop. Joyce had never thought about divorce before, up until that point Jonathan came home in tears. She could have taken a few more years of tolerating Lonnie, but if there was even the slightest chance that he might hurt Jonathan or Will, she wouldn't stand for it.

She never anticipated that the town would turn on her so fast after the divorce.

As soon as Lonnie was out of the picture, all of Hawkins seemed to have just disowned her. They forgot that Joyce was also a daughter of Hawkins, who also had a bright future ruined by mistakes she made as teenager. Who was also left scarred and broken by Lonnie's departure, with two of his sons to care for. Her once-chatty customers now looked away when she rang them up at the store. People stared when she walked from the bank entrance to where she parked her car. They whispered behind her back during PTA meetings. And all this she would have borne without grief if her sons didn't come home from school, crying about bullies.

Making friends was never Joyce's strong point. All the people who came by to pay visits or invited them to dinner parties, those were Lonnie's friends. And although they were never outwardly malicious toward her, she could tell the difference between being friendly and being a friend.

The only person she could really confide in was the deputy who had come to her house that day about seven years ago, Jim Hopper, who was a captain now. He had been over to check on the couple a few times, much to Lonnie's distaste. But she couldn't bother even him about her problems as a new divorcee. He had his own wife to think of, and his own daughter to worry about. Cancer, *fuck*. She completely understood that his problems outweighed hers.

She walked by Jonathan's room once, about a week after Lonnie left them for good. His door was cracked open, and through it she could see that his lamp was still on. Joyce was about to walk in and tell Jonathan that it was time for bed.

But through the crack in the doorway, she spied Will curled up under the covers with his big brother. And Jonathan was holding him as he cried quietly, hushing him in a comforting way. She could hear Jonathan whispering to his little brother, "It's going to be okay."

Joyce waited until she was back in her own room before she crumpled to the ground on her knees. The scene broke her heart more completely than Lonnie's departure ever could have. Her beautiful little boys, now as alone and unwanted and ostracized as herself. And Jonathan, only eleven-years-old, and already shouldering more responsibility than a boy his age should.

This wasn't what she was expecting when Lonnie Byers got the locker next to hers. She didn't want to make her parents' mistakes, but she wouldn't have wanted to make these either. She thought about the girl she used to be, the one who wanted so badly to be Lonnie's girl.

She's Lonnie's ex-wife now.

Jonathan came home with bruises often, from fights, defending himself or Will. He was unpopular in school; the kids were mean,

meaner than kids ought to be. He was quiet. This didn't surprise Joyce at first, but it had gotten to the point that his teachers were starting to call her and ask if Jonathan was alright, if he had any special needs.

Will suffered a similar fate, but he soon found a group of friends where he fit in. Joyce remembers getting a call in the middle of the day from one Karen Wheeler, informing her that Will had gone over to their house and would be staying for dinner, and would that be a problem?

"No!" Joyce said enthusiastically. "No, of course not! H-How is he? Has he eaten yet?"

Joyce had to keep herself from running over to the Wheelers' just to sit and watch Will interact with children his age, watch him play and be happy for once, and maybe convince herself that she was doing okay with him and that Will would be okay, too.

When she learned that the Wheelers had another child of Jonathan's age, Joyce had tried to send Jonathan over to play as well. The arrangement worked out for a little while, but it was promptly ended. Partially because the Wheelers' daughter, Nancy, had a new friend—a girl—with whom she preferred to spend more time. And partially because Jonathan was too shy and quiet to be a very good playmate, and there is little that a boy and a girl find in common when they are twelve-year-olds.

So Jonathan was left alone to take pictures and listen to music in his room, and Joyce was left to forever worry that he was lonely.

Between the boys, Jonathan looked the most like Lonnie. Will had his mother's wide eyes, dark hair, and sweet smile. Jonathan had Lonnie's light hair, angular jaw, and a darkness in his eyes that was as deeply haunting as the darkness that ensnared Joyce at the lockers all those years ago. Despite that, Jonathan was nothing like his father. The profound difference had Hawkins marveling that a charismatic social butterfly like Lonnie could sire such a strange, taciturn boy as Jonathan. Joyce couldn't help but blame herself for what the town saw as faults in her eldest son's character.

“Chief... a fight broke out and—,” she heard Officer Callahan’s voice over the radio. Hopper grabbed it and made it clear that he didn’t have time to deal with teenaged antics, but he was promptly cut off by Callahan.

“It’s Jonathan Byers,” he said. “You haven’t seen Joyce, have you?”

On the drive back to the station, Joyce massaged her temples. Hopper tried to assure her that it was probably nothing. As odd as her son was, he was harmless, and Hopper was sure that whatever happened as probably a misunderstanding.

Jonathan? Assaulting a police officer? There were definitely a lot of knuckleheads in Hawkins, and Hopper joked that some of them were working for him. Still, Joyce couldn’t brush off the anxiety that washed over her. Her heart was pounding in her chest and her hands shook. Again, she couldn’t help but feel responsible: every time she imagined her worst nightmare involving Jonathan, it always had something to do with him falling under arrest somehow. She was always afraid that her bad parenting would land him in trouble one day, and now it has.

“Hey!” Hopper said, calling her attention when she drifted away. “Look, I’m sure it’s fine! He’s a good kid, let’s just go to the station and see what’s up, I’m sure it’s fine.”

At the station, Joyce rushes to the office where Jonathan is being held. Her son in handcuffs, her worst nightmare come true. What she didn’t expect to see, however, was Karen Wheeler’s daughter in the chair next to him.

“I thought I could save Will,” Jonathan told her in the hallway later that day, after explaining to the chief why there were bear traps and lighter fluid in the back of his car. Her heart ached at the sentiment; if it was possible that there was someone out there who loved Will

even more than her, it would be Jonathan. "I still do."

"This is not yours to fix alone!" she said.

That was what hurt her the most.

How alone he felt, how alone he thought he was. She could only think about those few years she spent, parenting and working and paying the bills without Lonnie's help. She could only think about how fast Hawkins turned on her once their golden boy, Lonnie, was out of the picture, and how utterly, completely, pathetically alone she felt. How painful the weight of loneliness felt on her shoulders, and it broke her heart to see Jonathan trying to shoulder that same loneliness.

"You act like you're all alone out there in the world, but you're not!" More than anything, this was what Joyce wanted Jonathan to know and take to heart.

"You're not alone!" Joyce said, and she wrapped him up into her arms. Jonathan leaned in, put his arms around his mother, and Joyce was caught off guard by the fact that she could feel his chin brushing against the top of her head.

She never wanted him to feel alone, never wanted him to feel the way she did when she was with Lonnie. She had depended on him so long, made him feel like her cross as Lonnie's ex-wife was his to bear, too. Or maybe it was Lonnie's departure that made him feel that alone was better than being with someone like Lonnie.

But alone isn't better. With someone, with people, with love is always better.

Joyce finishes ironing the flannel, slips a hanger into the sleeves and lets it hang from a hook on the wall, left over from the Christmas lights situation.

She worries again, whether or not she will be able to give Jonathan the chance she never got. The chance to actually get out of Hawkins and make a better life for himself. He wants to go to NYU, which is so far away and expensive, it pains her to even think about it. She still worries about him, as old as he is now. He's been so alone, has been bullied and beaten, has had a difficult past and has been through a lot over the past year.

He, of all people, deserves happiness.

One day, when another one of Lonnie's old friends stops her at the mart and asks how Lonnie's boys are doing, she hopes she'll be able to say, wholeheartedly, that they are fine and will be fine.

Joyce reaches for another shirt in the laundry basket, but as she lays it on the ironing board, the door swings open, and for the briefest of moments, she has a vision of Lonnie stepping into the house. Her heart skips a beat and her eyes widen.

But it is only Jonathan walking through the front door. He raises his brows, acknowledging his mother. He has grown up so much. Sometimes, when she comes home from shifts at the store, she has to do a double-take at him or wonder for a second why there's a young man in her house. And then she remembers Lonnie, and she thinks that for all the hurt she endured, at least two good things came out of it.

"Hey, Mom!" says Will, popping his head in through the door and then pushing past Jonathan.

"Hey there, kiddo!" Joyce says. "So, how was the game? Did you—?"

Joyce's voice goes astray when a third person walks through the door: Nancy Wheeler. Jonathan motions for Nancy to come further into the room and then he closes the door behind them. Joyce knows she shouldn't get too excited, not when there's so much potential to embarrass Jonathan and ruin everything.

"Hi, Mrs. Byers," Nancy says with a smile, and Joyce returns the gesture.

"Hi, Nancy," Joyce says. "So good to see you! How's your mom doing?"

"She's great!" Nancy says. "Last I saw, she was testing out a new casserole recipe, so be ready for her to pop over next week with samples for you all."

Joyce laughs.

"So, are you staying for dinner?" Joyce asks Nancy, and she makes a move toward the kitchen. But Jonathan interrupts.

"Oh, wait, um," he says. "We're actually... I'm so sorry, Mom, I meant to call and tell you earlier. I... We... We're not staying for dinner."

"Oh?" Joyce asks, stopping her ironing for a moment. "Aren't you hungry?"

"It's not that, it's just," Jonathan says, putting his hands in his pockets, evidently having a hard time with whatever is supposed to be the next part of his sentence.

"Nancy and I are going to see a movie tonight," he says.

Joyce is momentarily speechless.

A date. Jonathan is going on a date.

"I just stopped by to bring Will home and grab a jacket, but the movie starts in a little bit," Jonathan says, checking his watch.

"Oh," Joyce says. "Oh, ok.. Alright, then..."

"Is that alright?" Jonathan asks. "You don't need me to do something before I go or—?"

"No! No, no, it's alright," Joyce says, her voice trembling although she doesn't mean for it to. "That's okay. I guess I'll have some quality time alone with Will, then. You two go on. Have fun."

Jonathan looks at his mother as if he doesn't quite believe her. But

then he ducks into his room and returns with a jacket. He kisses Joyce on the cheek and promises to be home by 10 before escorting Nancy back out the door.

They are both sixteen. And Joyce watches through the window as her oldest son walks Nancy back to his car. The scene is too familiar to her, and she cannot help the nerves that become agitated with each step the young couple takes. The world turns to gray for a moment as she watches it unfold. She feels her tongue sticking to the roof of her mouth, feels the turning of the earth and what feels like the next revolution in the cycle. She watches as the next normal, middle class, suburban girl falls for the Byers boy with the dark eyes.

But then they look at each other, Jonathan and Nancy, and they say something to each other that Joyce cannot hear. When she looks at Jonathan's face, the smile there is so genuine that it breaks her heart. When he laughs, she swears that she feels the crystallized fear inside of her shatter into a million pieces. All of it, all that fear and anxiety that ruled her life leaves her for this one moment.

Joyce no longer worries about Jonathan. She no longer worries that he might be left alone. Or that he might become irresponsible and negligent or disrespectful like his father. She isn't worried that he'll leave and forget them all. She's no longer afraid that he'll turn out anything like Lonnie.

He is *her* son after all. Hers alone.